



Public Communication, algorithms and democracy: between the stamina of former political candidates and the fragility of municipalities social media pages.

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Abstract

Purpose: Understand how public communication and political communication emerge, diverge, or converge, in the social media pages of local governments in Portugal. In the frame of larger research, it will be presented here the interaction of local governments Facebook pages and the respective personal presidents' pages. The five presidents' pages with the greater number of followers were chosen as they do not only impress by the number of followers but represent important municipalities in the number of citizens.

Methodology: In the realm of a pragmatist paradigm, quantitative and qualitative content analysis were the methods used for collecting and analysing the Facebook pages of the local governments' presidents' personal pages with more followers and the 5 correspondent municipalities Facebook pages. The analysis concerned the period between the 1st of October 2024 and the 31st of March 2025.

Findings: Presidents' pages in a certain sense maintain the characteristics of a political "candidate" page. Political Communication is, precisely, the main category in the presidents' pages. While in the municipalities Facebook pages the winner is the Events category. In these pages the Public Communication category comes second. Public Communication is understood in both groups as a top-down exercise where information is the key aspect. We are far from a conceptualization of Public Communication as participation. Moreover, even if social media are being used, they are not used in their specificities, that is, interaction.

Research limitations/implications: The big limitations as always is the short period of time in analysis and the difficulty to go beyond an exploratory study. As it is mandatory, in a pragmatist approach to research, the results have been shared with local governments in public workshops under the title "in defence of Public Communication". With these workshops researchers fulfilled the desiderata expressed by the pragmatist paradigm, to bring research to society, to be able to improve knowledge at an immediate societal level, and to confront the research

results with the main actors (in a certain sense research objects) of the research being presented here.

Originality/Value: None has been said in recent years, using a content qualitative analysis (beyond a quantitative one) in Portugal (and according to the literature review, in Europe, in general), about the digitalization of Public Communication and how the use of social media has been used (or not) a way to connect the state and the citizens.

Keywords: Public Communication, Political communication, Local governments, Facebook pages

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction

*Una buena noticia: nuestras elecciones pueden ser perfectamente racionales. Una mala noticia: esa exquisita realidad es muy posiblemente la excepción a la regla. (Marina, 2025, p. 93)**

The interest in the way Public Communication (PC) is being digitalised seems to go hand in hand with new challenges the internet seems to pose to democracy. In a moment of distrust both at public institutions and at the information posted at the different digital platforms, the communication of local municipalities seems a way to go, in order to help facing both problems. If it is true that the partisanship of Public Communication is not a digital phenomenon, it is nevertheless accurate to assert that social networks have come to optimize promiscuous relationships between the individual (the partisan) and the public.

Public Communication (PC) fulfils different functions at the same time: from offering the mandatory information from Public Administration, to contributing for social cohesion, from defending the basic values of the state, to negotiating with citizens, these are some of the numerous functions PC may be called to fulfil. There seems to exist both a theoretical gap on how Public Communication might be understood today, in its digitalized forms, as well as an empirical gap in how it works in Facebook pages, in Portugal. The main interest of the work being presented here is to offer information concerning, precisely, the relationship of the Public Communication and the Political Communication in five major municipalities in Portugal as well as to confront these results to the analysis of the “private” pages of the some municipalities presidents’ pages.

It seems quite banal to state that social media introduced a new way for local governments to communicate with citizens. Whenever reading on social media (even in those that offer quite good critical perspectives on the issue) the transformation in society brought in the last decade by the generalization of the use of those platforms made the Portuguese state to drive its use by local governments. Social media are characterized by offering the municipalities new possibilities and promote more interactive and dynamic forms in the way they interact with their citizens. From a more theoretical approach and envisaged from the Public Communication theoretical approaches the actual conception of the role of Public Communication in our democracies seems to be in great convulsion. In the last decade different authors in Europe, Canada or South America have been calling for a more dynamic perspective of what Public Communication is or should be. Even if it could be possible to offer considerations on

governmental perspectives from the USA it is sufficiently far enough from the Portuguese reality to let the authors leave it for another moment.

2. Public Communication

It seems impossible to find a coherent and unanimous definition on what is normally called “Public” Communication (PC). Until recently the idea that all the PC would come under the umbrella of Political Communication has, however, been challenged. Different authors have underlined the fact that it might be better to offer a strict and independent notion of what we shall consider PC. As Dubois (2024) said to consider “public communication” as one possibility under the great umbrella of “political communication” was a given aspect of the discussions of these issues during the last decades but has been challenged, not only due to theoretical developments but also to state the importance and the possibilities offered by the digitalization of PC. It might also be noted that the historical moment we are living in, the need to confront and control disinformation (false or misleading information peddled deliberately to deceive) as well as the more innocuous misinformation (when someone inadvertently spreads false information), call to a more interventive position of the local governments in building trust and promote the interest of communities in the construction of the *common good*.

Public Communication is usually defined as the ecosystem of activities of public organizations and institutions that offer information, transmit and share information with the citizens in order to explain the public decisions and actions, to enable citizens to see them as legitimate and to defend the common social values as well as to keep and defend the social cohesion (Zèmor, 2008; Pasquier, 2012a). To this definition we should add all the more recent ideas where the dichotomy Public / Political is replaced by the dichotomy Public / Private. In this sense the two groups being under analysis here must be understood as belonging to two different categories. The municipalities Facebook pages to the realm of Public Communication and the Presidents’ ones to the domain of the Private Communication. In this article we would like to echo Pasquier's ideas when he states that “we need to distinguish political parties’ communication from that of public institutions and organizations”. The main point in this sense is that “public money should contribute exclusively to finance public interest activities”. (Pasquier, 2017, 49)

2.1. Public Communication / Political Communication

Assuming the tension between different views of the very concept of “Public Communication”, as well as its recent history, it will be argued in the wake of Zèmor (1995, 2008) that it must be understood essentially and primarily as the field of “communication” that is legitimized by the public interest. For the aforementioned author, we are beyond the notion of public domain in the legal sense of the term, to understand the role of Public Communication as supporting civic knowledge and facilitating public action. One of its main functions even seems to be ensuring public debate. Other authors (Mabillard and Caron, 2022) highlight another aspect that also seems to be of the greatest relevance: its ability to build relationships of reciprocal trust between the public administration and citizens. It is clearly in this sense that we look at the use of social networks by municipalities. Social networks seem to be able to facilitate and enhance this co-construction of meanings as well as the negotiation processes between, in the case that interests us here, local governments and civil society, in particular, on a clear axis of proximity and co-construction of communities.

2.1.1. The digitalization of Public Communication

To speak of social media is to speak of a minefield of misinformation and even disinformation. Just as the press, or the automobile, brought new possibilities, challenges, and risks, social media, while facilitating interactions, have also become the scene of the greatest violations of reason (Villanueva, 2024). By increasing the pace of possible interactions, they allow for a greater scope for the partisanship of spaces that were supposedly agoras for Public Communication. While they seem to be able to realize the possibility of different public arenas, they also facilitate a certain miscegenation between pages in the public sphere and those in the private sphere—just think of the aforementioned personal and/or partisan (and therefore private) pages of mayors. Social media and the way municipalities use them seem to require extensive reflection on the part of all citizens, politicians, and, crucially, communication professionals and researchers in the field of Public Communication.

The issue of losing control over the "information/message/content" published, or becoming the target of criticism, are also legitimate concerns for professionals and academics. One could add to the above the issue of bots or the simple algorithmic management of social media at the service of big tech—or simply a mercantilist society where citizens are treated as consumers (Innerarity, 2025).

Authors are totally conscious that many issues have not been addressed here but the main objective of this paper is to present some data for discussion on these issues and especially a quite absent perspective, the one from communication sciences researchers. The question of social media influencers (SMIs) cannot however be missed at least as a highlight concerning an emergent issue. The question does not seem to have been raised at the Portuguese municipalities but as well as in other countries the scrutinous on financial investment seems to be always a relevant aspect that counts against the involvement of these actors.

3. Research design

Public Communication (PC) fulfils different functions at the same time: from offering the mandatory information from Public Administration, to contributing for social cohesion, from defending the basic values of the state, to negotiating with citizens, these are some of the numerous functions PC may be called to fulfil.

The main research questions were:

- Does the mobilization of social media by the local executives fulfil the desiderata of a pro-active understanding of Public Communication?
- How do those that govern local executives use their (private) social media? Are there the pages of a political candidate? How do they interact with those of the municipalities?

Only the pages of the presidents of municipalities that have more than 40 thousand followers are being taken into account. These figures are from Facebook digital platform, as Instagram is not used by all the referred presidents. Five private Facebook pages and the five pages from the municipalities where those personalities act as presidents have been analysed between the

first of October 2024 and the 31st of March 2025 in order to answer - even if only in an explorative way - the above research questions. Content analysis (both at its quantitative as well as its qualitative perspectives) has been the method used to collect and analyse the data supported by specific software programmes Fan Page Karma and MAXQDA. During the period referred, a total of 9006 posts were analysed. In the initial phase of the analysis, three main categories were identified to structure the types of communication observed: “public communication”, “political communication”, and “events”. These categories allowed the analysis to be organized according to the underlying intent of each publication. Within each category, three subcategories were further defined, aiming to reflect the different ways in which municipalities engage with citizens on social media, whether through the dissemination of institutional information, the encouragement of civic participation, the expression of political-party positions, or the promotion of cultural and social activities. All the above categories and sub-categories are conceptual driven ones. Authors used the literature review and former research articles to structure the map of analysis. A detailed description of each category and its respective subcategories used in the analysis is presented below.

Public Communication – This category includes all posts that, in their content, refer to information or communication of public interest, as well as those that show an intention to encourage public participation. The use of verbs that appeal to citizen involvement in city life or in discussions of matters relevant to the community is also a key element for classifying posts under this dimension.

Subcategories within Public Communication:

- a) **Informative Posts** – This subcategory includes all posts related to legal or administrative aspects of local government functioning or that provide citizens with mandatory information. It also includes all emergency announcements, health promotion or road safety campaigns, or simple road closure notices. Words such as "alert", "warning", or "advisory", as well as "prevention", "risk", or "emergency", are relevant to this category. Expressions such as "institutional information" are also indicative of this subcategory. Other examples include: "public tender procedures", "job openings", or "vacancies for position Y".
- b) **Top-down/Participation Attempts** – This subcategory groups posts that attempt to encourage citizens participation in the municipality, even in a simple way. In other words, it includes all attempts to create interaction with the public. An example would be posts encouraging citizens to listen to municipal assemblies or similar events.
- c) **Calls for Participation** – This subcategory includes all posts expressing a clear intention to promote active citizen participation in public life. All calls to action, such as responding to surveys on community needs or voting in participatory budgeting processes, are classified here. Naturally, all posts that invite citizen involvement in decision-making processes are also included.

Political Communication – All posts considered in this category must explicitly refer to activities that go beyond public policy, its co-construction, its discussion or implementation.

Subcategories:

- a) Governmental Communication – Generally, what some authors refer to as governmental communication falls into this subcategory. This is a rather fluid area, and although some might consider these types of posts as “public communication”, this analysis adopts the view that public communication should be transparent and reliable. Thus, all posts that mention or explicitly show the mayor or other members of the ruling party are classified here. Even in cases of ambiguity, autonomous coding by two researchers ensures greater consistency. Typical examples include posts about inaugurations or other public events promoted by the municipality.
- b) Party Affiliation – This subcategory includes all posts that textually or visually express some ideological orientation. Ceremonies, demonstrations, or other events that explicitly mention the ruling party or express support for ideological actions are included here. Local, national, or supranational events aligned with a clear partisan position (the president one) are also considered.
- c) Negative Mentions of the Opposition – Posts that contain negative references to local opposition figures, political or civic forces (or individuals) with ideological differences from the local government, are categorized under this subcategory.

Events – This category includes all posts that promote or report on cultural, sports, or social events, as well as humanitarian actions promoted by different entities or with an unidentified source. In general, all posters or other traditional forms of advertising, whether in mass or digital media (without additional explanation) are considered here. It also covers the promotion or reporting of cultural, sports, social or humanitarian events without explicit connection to the municipality, including advertising by private companies. In addition to the visual content of the post, certain textual expressions act as cues for coding under this category, such as: "event in X", "free event", "ticket price", "we share the record of", "event highlights", "festival of", "unmissable concerts", "the best programme ever", "winter programme", or "spring programme".

Subcategories:

- a) Municipal – This subcategory includes all posts that promote events organized by the local authority.
- b) Other Public Entities – This subcategory includes all posts that promote events organized by other public entities, but which are shared or promoted on the municipality's page.
- c) Private Entities – This subcategory includes all posts that promote events organized by private entities in the municipality, whether or not they included participation by a local official (as speaker or simply for a welcoming moment).

In the case of the presidents' pages, it was necessary to introduce a fourth category, designated "keep in touch", which encompassed posts in which the president acted as an "influencer" for the municipality, or just as a regular friend in a personal (a common citizen) FB page. This category included content such as updates on weather conditions, music recommendations aimed at fostering interaction with followers, and the sharing of news items — whether directly related to the municipality — that did not fit into any of the other predefined categories. In some cases, we had presidents acting as touristic guides promoting restaurants and touristic sites. This is the only data driven category. As it is clear in the literature, it is possible to open this kind of categories when researchers are really surprised by the data being found and they bring to the discussion new information that has not been considered at the literature review.

3.1. Presentation and explanation of the data

During the period under review, a total of nine thousand and six (9006) posts were collected and analysed from the Facebook pages of the five presidents with the highest number of followers, as well as, from the official pages of their respective municipalities. Below you can find Table 1 that offers in a schematic way the number of followers for each of the pages examined, along with the total number of posts published on each page during the defined timeframe. At the "page" column the name of the municipality can be found on the above box and the name of the president below.

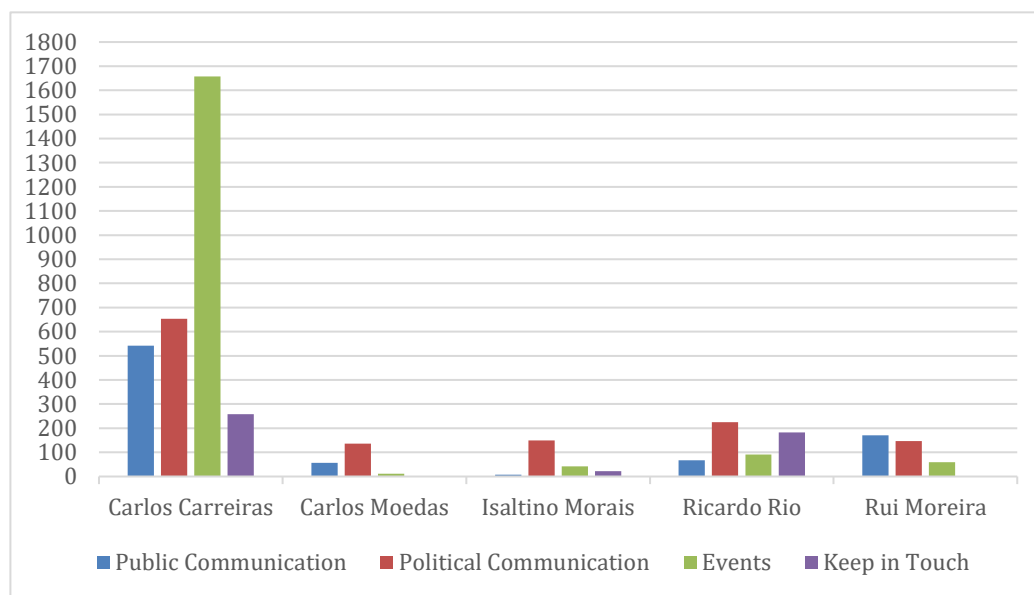
Municipality	Page	Followers	Posts	Posts per day	Reposts	Interaction rate
Cascais	CM Cascais	170 631	1547	8,6	3	0,04%
	Carlos Carreiras	48 422	3112	17,3	1547	0,05%
Oeiras	CM Oeiras	114 560	937	5,2	0	0,06%
	Isaltino Morais	56 000	221	1,2	0	2,00%
Lisboa	CM Lisboa	496 929	687	3,8	0	0,14%
	Carlos Moedas	60 722	205	1,1	7	2,47%
Braga	CM Braga	138 935	407	2,3	0	0,05%
	Ricardo Rio	60 209	565	3,1	167	1,45%
Porto	CM Porto	167 813	948	5,3	0	0,07%
	Rui Moreira	245 936	377	2,1	0	0,28%

Table 1. Pages Metrics

The analysis of the table reveals that, in general, municipal pages tend to have more followers than the personal pages of their respective presidents. This difference may be explained by the fact that the president represents a political party and serves a four-year term, whereas the municipalities pages disseminate content of broader interest and remains active regardless of who holds office. The sole exception is the President of Porto, Rui Moreira, whose personal page has a significantly higher number of followers than the municipality's official page. To be fair to the data, the number is almost the double of the municipalities page, and 6 or 7 times the other presidents' number of followers, a finding for which no clear explanation could be identified based on the analysis conducted. Regarding daily content sharing, municipal pages also display a higher volume of publications. This may be linked to the presence of teams responsible for communicating daily activities within the local government. In contrast, the presidents' personal pages are primarily used to promote initiatives in which they are personally involved, such as inaugurations or attendance at events, with such posts often

adopting a tone closer to that of campaign communication. In the case of President Carlos Carreiras, the number of posts recorded on his personal page doubles the one of the municipality page. This is due to the fact that the president systematically shares all posts published on the official page of the Municipality of Cascais, in addition to content from other pages, including programs and associations within the municipality. This pattern coincides with the fact that his page records the lowest average interaction rate per post among the presidents analysed, standing significantly below the others. This raises questions as to whether followers are actually receiving and processing the information shared. Considering that good practice in digital communication recommends sharing no more than two posts per day, the number of publications on this page far exceeds that guideline. The combination of content overload and low interaction rate suggests that followers may not be effectively engaged, or that, faced with such exhaustive posting, they ultimately pay little attention to what is published. After identifying the presidents with the highest number of followers, a content analysis was carried out on the posts published on both their personal pages and the official pages of their respective municipalities, followed by segmentation based on previously defined categories.

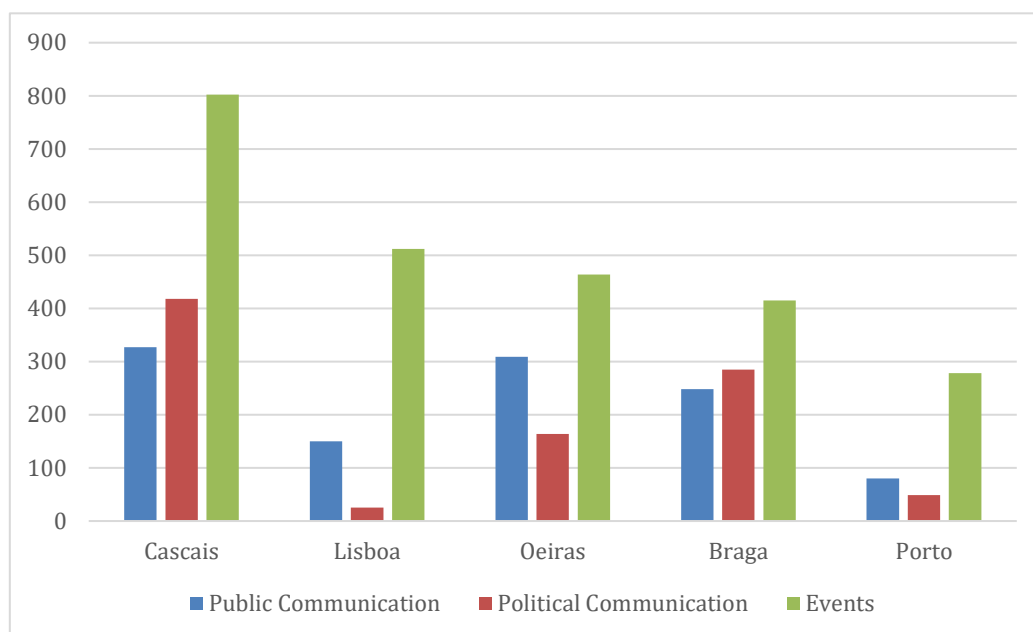
The categorisation process took into account the origin of each post, thus enabling the presentation, in the tables below, of a two-stage analysis: first, the posts published on the presidents' personal pages, and second, those published on the official pages of their municipalities.



Graphic 1. Presidents' Pages Main Categories

The results show that, on the presidents' personal pages, there is a predominant tendency to share content of a political nature. This category includes posts related to the presidents' presence at inaugurations, celebrations marking the completion of public works in the municipality, meetings with members of the Government, highlights of achievements by the current executive, sharing of news about the municipality, opinion articles, and appearances on television programmes. Still within the analysis of content published by the presidents, the case of President Carlos Carreiras stands out. As previously mentioned, he shares all activities taking place in the municipality. In some instances, when an event is reported in the media, the president shares all the related news articles, contributing to a high volume of content in the "Events" category, which represents the largest share of posts on his page. The significant number of posts classified under the "Keep in Touch" category can also be partly explained by his weekly sharing of information on weather conditions, which generates a considerable volume of publications. Within the same "Keep in Touch" category, the work of President Ricardo Rio is also noteworthy. On a regular basis, he shares links to songs or playlists accompanied solely by the text "Good morning!". This type of content tends to be well received by followers, who frequently interact with these posts. Finally, still within the scope of the "influencer" president, President Isaltino Morais deserves particular mention for his posts promoting restaurants in the municipality of Oeiras, taking on the role of a local promoter to highlight and add value to the region gastronomy. It is worth noting that this initiative by the president has already resulted in the creation of the *Isaltino Morais Gastronomic Guide* — complete with its own website — where numerous restaurants can be found, organised by area, and accompanied by reviews and dish recommendations.

Regarding communication on the municipalities' pages, there is a significant volume of posts dedicated to promoting events organised by the local government. In November and December, for example, numerous posts were recorded about Christmas-related initiatives, such as fairs, exhibitions, and performances, as well as publications referring to New Year's Eve celebrations. However, it is also evident that municipal pages place a stronger emphasis on sharing "public communication" content. This reflects an institutional commitment to ensuring the timely dissemination of information of relevance to the community, such as public service announcements, operational updates, and alerts in situations that may affect daily life. Unlike politically oriented or image-building content, these communications serve a primarily functional purpose, aiming to maintain an informed citizenry and to reinforce the role of the municipality as the primary, reliable source of official (we could also say in many cases mandatory) information.



Graphic 2. Municipalities Pages Main Categories

In the final phase of the analysis, a more detailed categorisation was carried out, in line with the subcategories already identified. The objective was to examine, within the main categories, how communication differs according to the intended purpose of the content. Tables 2 and 3 present the results obtained through the analysis.

	Public Communication			Political Communication			Events			Keep in Touch
	Informative	Top-down	Calls for Participation	Governmental Communication	Party Affiliation	Negative Mentions of the Opposition	Municipal	Other Public Entities	Private Entities	
Carlos Carreiras	434	69	39	592	48	14	788	504	366	258
Carlos Moedas	46	7	4	131	3	2	6	4	2	0
Isaltino Morais	6	1	1	147	2	0	3	17	22	22
Ricardo Rio	65	2	0	224	0	1	9	63	19	182
Rui Moreira	166	4	1	145	1	1	16	35	8	0

Table 2. Presidents' Pages Categories and Subcategories

This analysis reveals that, in the case of the presidents, the *Governmental Communication* subcategory dominates the range of content published. This occurs because many posts, as previously mentioned, refer to the presidents' activities in initiatives, events, or meetings in which the president is present. It is also evident that the intention behind this type of communication is to highlight the work carried out by the current executive, offering greater insight into the president's daily agenda, and thus reinforcing the perception of ongoing political campaigning.

Within the *Public Communication* category, most of the content published on the presidents' pages consists of public notices, such as announcements of water supply interruptions, roadworks, or community alerts. The findings indicate a significant gap in the way presidents communicate with the aim of encouraging greater public participation in the political life of the municipality.

	Public Communication			Political Communication			Events		
	Informative	Top-down	Calls for Participation	Governmental Communication	Party Affiliation	Negative Mentions of the Opposition	Municipal	Other Public Entities	Private Entities
Cascais	255	43	29	409	9	0	646	125	31
Lisboa	127	13	10	24	1	0	489	12	11
Oeiras	237	65	7	159	5	0	372	78	14
Braga	161	45	42	277	7	1	359	56	0
Porto	76	2	2	47	1	1	245	21	12

Table 3. Municipalities Pages Categories and Subcategories

On the municipalities' institutional pages, the most prominent subcategory is *Municipal Events*, as all initiatives organised by the local government are promoted. Communication occurs at different stages: prior to the event, through the dissemination of posters and *save the date* messages addressed to the community; on the day of the event, with posts informing that the activity is taking place; and after the event, often accompanied by photographic albums documenting key moments. It is worth noting that in December and January, the volume of posts in this category increases significantly due to initiatives linked to Christmas and New Year's Eve celebrations. The *Public Communication* category also stands out for recording a substantially higher number of posts than is observed on the presidents' personal pages, particularly within the *Informative Communication* subcategory. This includes notices regarding construction works in the region, road closures, and weather alerts, especially in situations that may pose risks to the municipality's residents. In parallel, and similar to what is observed on the presidents' pages, the *Governmental Communication* subcategory comprises posts highlighting the presidents' presence at inaugurations, interventions related to the redevelopment of public spaces in the municipality, and meetings with members of the government. These posts tend to reinforce the visibility of the president as a central figure in delivering projects that contribute to the municipalities development, associating their image with tangible results of governmental action. The analysis suggests that the production and dissemination of such content is predominantly an institutional responsibility, falling to the municipalities official pages rather than the presidents' personal pages. This separation between institutional and personal communication reinforces the perception that presidents' pages are more oriented towards promoting politically valuable actions and initiatives, thereby enhancing the visibility of the president, while municipal pages are more focused on managing and disseminating information of public utility. However, it is important to highlight that, in both groups, *Public Communication* continues to be conceived primarily as a hierarchical, top-down process, with information dissemination as its central purpose. This approach falls far from embracing a participatory model that actively involves citizens in municipal life. Although social media inherently offers tools for interaction and for increasing the visibility of the executives activities, these capacities remain largely untapped, limiting the potential of these platforms to serve as placards for top-down information(s).

4. Conclusions

From what we have found it seems possible to say that the real issue will be how the politicians will assume their roles when reaching the presidency of local governments. We will not be the first, and unfortunately not the last, to call upon a new understanding of what is meant by "Public Communication" and how it must be understood by those that are governing. Authors as Bèssiers (2009, 2019) or Mabillard, Zumofen and Dubois (2024), just to quote a few researchers that have already challenged the way municipalities are managing their digital social platforms have already highlighted the need for a reformulation on the way municipalities should manage their presences online. Some of the main challenges social media have imposed have to do with their immense capacity to promote the discussion in an interactive way in order to understand the citizens problems and wishes and in what might be called in a quite literal translation of the latin languages to establish, even regime pacts.

The data showed that in Portugal we are far from using social media platforms for improving not only how Public Communication is executed but also how it is understood. Zèmor (2020, 7) points out the importance of a new understanding of PC and its importance in society: “Il faut se défier d’une démocratie d’opinion, issue de la rencontre élitiste de quelques experts, de sondages et des médias. Elle propose un modèle réduit du peuple.” If it is true that social media enable new forms of interaction between the State and the citizens (Mabillard, Zumofen, Dubois, 2024), as it offers new, more original, more interactive ways to develop this relationship it is also true that, the Facebooks pages analysed here seem far from that reality. Between the lack of resources, the absence of communication professionals in the municipalities, the financial issues or just a poor understanding of what Public Communication is or should be. All questions concerning the way to involve citizens in the co-construction of the “common good”, the difficulties all democracies are being faced with or who and how PC is being managed in local governments are some of the many questions the researchers would like to understand better in the near future. Moreover, at the moment of the publication of this article new local governments will be swearing-in. How will they transform the digitalization of Public Communication and the way PC will be understood in Portugal? As part of an ongoing project the authors of this research aim to continue trying to figure out how social media could be used to promote a Public Communication that enables to configure a common good and an open society.

* Good news: our elections may be totally rational. Bad news: this exquisite kind of rationality is possibly the exception to the rule.

Acknowledgments

The research being presented here is part of a larger project that has had the support of Instituto Politécnico de Lisboa: IPL/IDI&CA2024/META_ESCS

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